

CHAPTER 8

THE FAMILY AND THE HOME

576 IN the Min Chia language the word "hao" means both a "family" and a "house"; every house is the home of some family, and a family dispersed without a home is something unheard of and unknown. This well expresses the central importance of the home in the social organisation. The Min Chia have few institutions which transcend the family or gather individuals into an organisation not founded on a kin group. The village it is true has its headmen, and as has been pointed out the worship of the Ber Dser, the Founder, is not confined to his descendents in the male line or to those of the same surname. But the village is after all only a group of families most of which, if not indeed all, are interrelated on the female side. There are no age classes, no societies in which boys or young men can find a centre of social organisation distinct from that of the family. For most Min Chia therefore the family is the social unit in which he passes his whole life. If he is a peasant farmer, he cultivates fields held jointly with his brothers, if he turns to business he becomes a partner or assistant in a family shop or small business in which none but kinsmen are employed, except for the most menial duties.

- 573 One exception exists, for the better off classes at least, in the schools. The peasant boy who only attends the village school for a few years meets there none but his fellow villagers, many of whom are related to him in some degree, and all already well known. But the son of a more wealthy family who is sent to the Middle School in the city makes contacts beyond the narrow circle of relatives and villagers. He meets boys from other villagers, or from other families

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living in the city who are in no way related to his own kin. 573 ●
Among the Min Chia, as with the Chinese, the friendships thus made are long lasting and profound. This solidarity between old schoolmates is the only social force which can compare with the bonds of kinship, and the influence of the educational system is thus much more far reaching than might be supposed if only scholastic standards were taken into account.

England is supposed to be the country where the influence of the "old school tie" is most pervasive and persistent beneath the forms of political democracy, but though the emblem is unknown in China the solidarity is even more conspicuous, for it is founded on a longer tradition. Far back in Chinese history, in the Feudal Age of Confucius, centuries before the Christian Era, this cohesion of the pupils and disciples of a renowned teacher began to play a part opposed to, or at least independent of, the feudal hierarchy. In later periods the educated class which was also the governing class, was always divided between cliques composed of the followers of some philosopher or man of letters, and very often the basis of these divisions was the fact that these followers had once been pupils also. At the present time the alumni of one University, or the returned students from one foreign country, are found as organised groups competing for political power and scholastic preferment with similar rival affiliations.

The influence exercised by such associations of old schoolmates adds to the respect with which education is universally regarded, and in turn is increased by the fact of this respect. In China to-day two organisations distinct from the family wield great power: the army and the university, and the greater of these is the university. A general receives the respect due to one who can employ force, the professor, the modern successor of the scholar of

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- 573 old China, is treated with a greater deference, based not on fear, but on that admiration for learning which is so deeply rooted in Chinese cultural tradition.

There can be no doubt that this attitude has been taken over by the Min Chia from their Chinese neighbours and rulers. It is perhaps reinforced among them by the fact that learning, which means Chinese learning, involves the study of a foreign language and thus sharpens the distinction between the literate and the unlettered. Min Chia who have passed through the Middle School have in the process become a distinct group, to whom Chinese is as familiar as their own language, sharing interests and experiences which their less educated relatives do not understand and cannot appreciate. The school has become for them a new kind of greater family, for just as Chinese tradition accords to the teacher the respect due to a father, not merely in school, but in society generally, so schoolmates feel towards each other the intimacy, if not always the affection, otherwise reserved for kinsmen. Friendship between young men largely compensates for the absence of free social intercourse between the sexes, and such friendships are almost always based either on kinship or on fellowship at school.

- 576 It is still customary in Min Chia families for the married sons to remain in the paternal home, at least during the lifetime of the parents, and consequently a Min Chia home is usually fully occupied with numerous children, unmarried daughters, daughters-in-law, grandchildren and
[581] other relatives. In a culture where Ancestor Worship plays a major rôle it is natural that the bearing of children, especially sons, should be considered the first duty of women, 584 and the principal object of marriage. No Min Chia marriage is arranged by the free choice of the bride and groom, 596 except in the irregular elopements discussed earlier, and consequently affection and companionship, though these